ACTIVIST, POLITICIAN AND THE BUREAUCRAT: ILLUSIONS OF JUSTICE IN MANNU BHANDARI'S *MAHABHOJ*

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Abstract

Mannu Bhandari (1931-2021) is one of the foremost Indian novelists and short-story writers.

She has been credited to have published four novels, two plays, and nine collections of short stories apart from writing screen plays and children's books. Her first novel, Ek Inch Muskaan (1962), co-authored with the renowned Hindi writer Rajendra Yadav, was an experimental story involving a man and two women whose lives crisscross each other. Her next novel, Aap Ka Bunty (1971), seen through the eyes of the titular child, recounted how a failing marriage and the parents' divorce affects the child. Her stories provide unusual expression to the intimate experiences of women and their world. She has forcefully expressed the everyday concerns of post-colonial modern Indian women, their search for agency and identity against patriarchal social stranglehold which does not allow them autonomy. Bhandari dares to touch unexplored areas of women's lives, direct and indirect taboos they encounter which are ranged against their emancipation. Her creative power lies in the authentic representation of the lives of the middle class women looking for freedom from social and moral constrains. However, Bhandari's writing is not limited to the world of women alone. Like other contemporary male writers, Mannu Bhandari has written powerful stories on almost all aspects of human life. This paper is a reading of Mannu Bhandari's third novel Mahabhoj (The Great Feast, 1979) and examines how power operates in developing democracies caught between the contrary pulls of tradition and modernity. Borrowing

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from the conceptual frameworks from Weber and Zizek's, it tries to understand how India as a developing democracy is still struggling to evolve a just and egalitarian social order.

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> If money could cure human grief, humanity would be at an end.
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> (*The Great Feast* 1-2)

Prologue

Let me begin with a heartfelt condolence for some ordinary villagers murdered in the terrains of Sonebhadra, the place where I had spent most of my childhood. As a student when I first read Wordsworth's *Prelude* that immortalises the scenic beauty of the Lake Districts in England, I tried to close my eyes to imagine it; I visualized the peaceful, though not so scenic, landscapes of my hometown. I don't know whether Sonebhadra has even a little similarity to the Lake Districts; however, I have always felt that the nondescript locale of my sleepy rural countryside was very dear to me and I've always cherished and romanticised it. A few years ago, when the disturbing news surfaced in the national media about the gruesome murder of some ten people and critical injury to many over a land dispute, I was shocked. The said piece of land was an issue of discord and contention since the year 1955. National media channels and newspapers termed this manslaughter as "genocide". Suddenly, my place had become '(in)famous'. Politicians flocked to offer support to the aggrieved kin, and journalists descended with their cameras to capture the ground reality, augmenting the public opinion "How inhuman?" But one wonders: is it not a pretentious display of public sentimentalism? I could see the theatrics of political parties and media persons and immediately recalled *Mahabhoj*, a Hindi novel written by Mannu Bhandari, though decades ago, which conveyed the same bitter truths:

But as soon as the news reached the city, a stream of vehicles carrying Ministers, political leaders and journalists descended on the village. The clouds of smoke from the fire had dispersed in a day, but the clouds of dust raised by the vehicles from the city took many days to settle. Moist-eyed political leaders expressed outrage in tearful voices, and made many fine promises. Next day, illustrated

accounts of the incident reached every home. Some saw the report while still yawning from the early morning drowsiness, others read it with their first cup of tea. A dark shadow of dismay appeared on their faces. The tea tasted bitter. Sounds of sympathy and sorrow issued from their lips: "O horrible . . . Simply inhuman! How long will all this go on? Tch tch tch . . .!" And the page was turned. A short while later, the newspaper, like the villagers' lives, ended up on the rubbish heap. (*The Great Feast* 1-2)

Although politicians have promised monetary compensation and justice against the perpetrators, I wonder: "Will these people ever get justice? Won't it be infinitely delayed like it happens in the stories of Kafka? What if the fate of these villagers will be like that of Saroha, the fictional village of Bhandari's novel?" Only time will tell if justice is delivered or denied.

I

To React, or to Respond (and to Act Later)

Originally published in Hindi in 1979, Mannu Bhandari's *Mahabhoj* (*The Great Feast*) is a tragic tale of a man who tries to challenge the age-old social hierarchy and the caste-ist oppression rooted in the rural countryside. It is set in a village called *Saroha* located in the Western regions of Uttar Pradesh where the by-election for one Legislative Assembly seat is going to take place very soon. The place is bustling with tactical strategies of political parties to align public opinion and votes in their favour. The novel begins with the discovery of the dead body of Bisesar aka Bisu on a road-bridge which is being pecked by vultures. When Bisesar was alive he tried to enlighten the poor, downtrodden Harijans in the village about their rights and freedom to live a life of dignity. A month earlier, a few houses in the Harijan colony situated on the outskirts of the village were set on fire and some of them were roasted alive. Bisu had been trying to gather evidence against the culprits of this massacre to ensure 'justice' for these people. However, Bisu's snooping around lands him in trouble, and later he is found dead. Whether his death was suicide or murder remains a mystery almost till the end of the novel. The death of an ordinary Dalit Bisesar would have been an inconsequential affair, erased and forgotten from the collective memory of the villages within days or months. But the 'event' becomes the main election agenda for the political leaders, Da Sahab and Sukul Babu, the chief minister and the opposition leader respectively trying to build their

image as doyens of justice. Sukul Babu (the leader of opposition) trumpets that Bisu was murdered at the behest of Zorawar who has the political patronage of Da Sahab (the chief minister), and Da Sahab promises in rallies to conduct a fair enquiry into the murder, claiming that Bisu was murdered by his childhood friend Binda for having an extra-marital affair with his wife Rukma, though the early police reports attributed his death to suicide due to a love affair gone wrong. Although the writer does not express the truth of Bisu's murder/suicide in obvious words, his death becomes a matter of political debates. Through politicization of death, the novel suggests that death of a Dalit in election season is an opportunity by the leaders to garner votes. Poor Bisu's life and death suddenly becomes significant, but one keeps wondering if he would really have been valued had there been no election.

Bisu's death was preceded by the massacre that burnt to death many Dalits: "It was only a month or so ago, some Huts in the Harijan settlement which lies on the outskirts of the village were set on fire. The next morning, the huts had been reduced to ashes and those inside them roasted" (*The Great Feast* 1). The mass incineration of the Harijans went almost noticed by the politicians, newspapers or urban middle class. Police investigation was unable to find out the perpetrators and the two constables were suspended to mark the pretence of justice. Compared to this incident, death of only one ordinary man like Bisesar appears to be an insignificant event.

Bisesar was neither a great man nor his death a great matter. So why is the matter of his death debated more than the mass murders which preceded it? Perhaps the election time augmented the importance of the former incident. His death perhaps matters because it is able to generate humanitarian urgency to address the question of violence. There is no denying that this humanitarian urgency is mediated by political considerations which are in turn affected by media's reproach of the public for not displaying enough sympathy for the victims of inhuman injustice and violence. The guilt that the public experience is sublimated through verbal outpouring of the repulsion at the violence and expression of empathy with the victims. However, this contemplation and criticism of violence produces a false sense of urgency in the civil society to end such acts of violence and to ensure that it is not repeated in future. Zizek calls this 'hypocritical sentiment of moral outrage' which exhibits nothing more than a kind of pseudo-urgency. Mannu Bhandari dramatises this pseudo sense of urgency when she writes about Dalit massacre in Saroha. The hypocrisy in the responses of leaders, journalists and

the public condemning violence is nothing more than empty words. Instead of action, they move from the desperate humanitarian call "to stop violence to the analysis." This analysis of violence helps the individuals in the society to pathologize and purge themselves of the collective guilt through ascription of violence to an individual monster. And instead of engaging with the root-cause behind such incidents and working to eradicate it, they debate and discuss it. Such apathetic contemplation betrays the very ideological urgency to bring a positive reformation in the society that they seem to vouch for. But through their reflective inaction they succeed in establishing their image as good people concerned about the society and also it reprieves them of shared guilt.

In fact this expression of pseudo-urgency without commitment to concrete action is due to the distance in experience; witnessing suffering of an individual with one's own eyes, and debating about that suffering in abstraction are completely different propositions. Zizek argues that although our power of "abstract reasoning has developed immensely, our emotional ethical responses remain conditioned by age-old instinctual reactions of sympathy to suffering and pain that is witnessed directly. This is why shooting someone point-blank is for most of us much more repulsive than pressing a button that will kill a thousand people we cannot see" (Zizek 43). This statement suggests that the proximity with suffering individual rouses sympathy for the victim and repugnance for the perpetrator. However, our indirect encounter with the suffering of someone through narration/reporting rouses sterile sympathy, but its translation into empathetic action by the listener is a rarity. The tragic event in the village of Saroha and the vigorous discussion about it appears as an expression of wry sentimentalism. Bhandari is suggesting that immediate reactions of anger by the people on the tragic event of Saroha are mere self-justifying sentimental sympathetic outpourings without any concrete commitment to empathetic action. Leafing through the pages of a newspaper, people temporarily react, and soon forget the tragic dimensions of an unjust act. They react, but neither respond nor act.

II

(Non)State Actors and the Committed Activist

As suggested in the foregone section, the narrative moment of the novel is the instant of Bisu's death. His 'death' suddenly assumes

political dimension as it occurs at the time of election and the political vultures desperately need a corpse to feed on and manipulate the opinion of voters in their favour. Both Da Sahab and Sukul Babu compete for the acquisition of Bisu's remains for their political interests. Da Sahab is the chief minister of the state, the custodian of 'law and order' so he has to publicly vouch that the dead will get justice. He assures the public in an election rally at Saroha that an impartial high-level inquiry will be conducted to know the truth of Bisu's death. However, before this impartial committee can 'find out' the facts, he tenders subtle indications for the crowd that "Bisesar committed suicide" (*The Great Feast* 51). On the other hand, Sukul Babu, the opposition leader, calls Bisu's death a political murder:

> What was the fault of these Harijans? That they asked for the wages at the government rate? Was this a crime? Perhaps it was—that's why they were burnt alive, and no one dared raise a finger against those who did the burning. When Poor Bisu tried to raise voice, he was silenced forever. Will anyone now dare raise a whimper of protest? Not one. The police came to take people's statements. No one dared to tell. They know that as soon as they tell the truth, they will be strangled to death, and where truth is strangled, it is futile to hope for justice. No, you cannot hope that you will ever get justice. (*The Great Feast* 20)

This verbal spat between Da Sahab and Sukul Babu over the dead reflects usual normalised practice of the political parties in power and opposition to erase/name, to stigmatize /martyr, to silence/ give meaning to the dead. It has been seen that the governments and oppositions often use the dead, turning them into martyrs/ enemies for/of a cause, employing them as a "free pass" and a banner for certain sorts of *politiking* in their own interest. In fact, *Mahabhoj* grapples with the fate of an individual crusader in a democratic society and makes its readers reflect upon the structures of governmentality, institutions of power and control that constitute the core of postcolonial democracy in India. The novel showcases the normative hegemonic control of individual lives by politics, bureaucracy and media. The coercive control of these institutional agencies of power is so precarious that it has the ability to even determine which lives are worth living/mourning, and which ones are not.

In the novel, the death of Bisu is preceded by the killing of Harijans. What transpired this inhuman genocide is never revealed. Except one single paragraph in the opening pages of the novel, there is nothing that one can find out about this ruthless tragedy. Although

Heera—the father of Bissu who has been possibly murdered as he was gathering evidence to expose the people involved in this slaughter—suggests that the reason of this killing must have been the simmering protest by a few labourers, whom Bisu was trying to organise and unite against the oppressive landlords through his the consciousness raising campaign:

> What can I say, sarkar –it was our Bisu's childish behaviour. He used to tell field labourers not to work for low wages. Fight for higher wages. Don't do any work for free. Don't pay such high interests on loan. The masters didn't like all this, sarkar. Pausing a moment, he added, 'And it's right, sarkar, if the labourers got provoked, who will bear the losses caused to the farming? How are fields to be tilled without labourers, sarkar. (*The Great Feast 87*)

Subtle inferences can be drawn here that the rich landlords were unhappy with the political mobilisation of the Harijans and in rage may have resorted to violence to frighten them for maintaining the status quo and forcing the poor labourers to work under them without questioning their authority.

Before the genocide occurred, Bisu was jailed for four years for unknown reasons (at least his father and others who know Bisu do not understand the reasons). It has been indicated in the novel that the police, at the behest of the rich landlords, found Bisu dangerous and put him behind the bars. Since Bisu, in this zeal to work for the emancipation of the exploited, refuses to accept the normalised structural violence—which has been going on unnoticed for centuries— he is christened as a 'bad subject'. Because he can speak, he should be silenced. His later incarceration and subsequent death is closely associated with his activism. Because representatives of the state-machinery along with the affluent and the powerful sections of the society have both physical and coercive power to control the personal courage, limited energy and economic resources a social activist, therefore the work of an activist like Bisu always carries unknown risks. Social activism involves several personal, legal and financial costs and risks. Highlighting these 'costs' and 'risks' of social activism, Gregory L. Wiltfang and Doug McAdam have argued:

> Cost is anything given up, forgone, spent, lost or "negatively" experienced (e.g., pain, fatigue, etc.) by activists during their participation in movement activities. Risk, on the other hand, refers to the activists' subjective anticipation or expectation of a cost that they may incur as a result of their movement participation (e.g., being arrested, paying a fine, being beaten, tortured, or killed). Costs are under the individual

> activist's control; risks, as future costs, depend not only on the activist's own actions, but on others' responses to the activist's actions. (*989*)

Bisu too has to pay the price: the cost of his self-less activism is his life. For his indomitable spirit and political activism, he faces the frivolous charge of criminality and consequent stigmatization for transgressing the unjust social norms. Since most societies value conformity to the structures of powers preferring to political quietism and moral status quo, they consider social activism as a dangerous transgression from the normal adjudging activists to be "outside agitators". Bisu's activism in the novel is a "reflexive response to structurally induced grievances" (McVeigh *515*) onto the lives of Harijans by the rich landlords like Zorawar who wields strong political clout due to his intimate political associations with Da Sahab. Zorawar represents the vested interests of non-state actors who in their collusion with state actors, create and circulate only those narratives which are favourable to them. By influencing political and social systems, he succeeds in getting Bisu labelled a criminal. Bisu is an example of an activist without social movement. He neither has support from the democratic institutions nor from the people for whom he fights. His everyday consciousness raising effort lies in mobilising the labourers against both the state and non-state actors to recognise the oppressive conditions of their social existence and oppose them. His activism can surely be understood as a precursor to later social protests and political movements by civil right groups, caste communities and group associations.

Pragmatics of the Dispassionate Politics

Da Sahab is the most interesting and enigmatic character in the novel, perhaps the only character who has been allowed to fully evolve. Despite this, his enigma persists throughout the narrative. In the novel, he comes out as a non-ethical political personality who is fully involved into political affairs of the state but always from outside and unaffected by its tragic consequences. Through his character, Bhandari is portraying the figure of the modern politician who is accustomed to functioning within the frameworks of bureaucratic-rationality constituted by the economical and institutional configurations of the modern. Da Sahab, as a political leader possesses the essential passion and fully understands that his success as a professional politician lies in ensuring a pragmatic compromise between politics and ethics. He exemplifies the Weberian hypothesis

that "politics is made with the head, not with other parts of the body or soul" (Weber 367).

Max Weber, in his seminal work, *Politics as Vocation* (1919), argues that a political person may live "for" politics or may live "off" politics. One who lives 'for' politics makes politics the central goal of his life and "either he enjoys the naked possession of the power he exerts, or he nourishes his inner balance and self-feeling by the consciousness that his life has meaning in the service of a 'cause'" (Weber 318). For Weber, politics is a realm of power, coercion and violence, and the mature politician must combine passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion to succeed in his vocation. For Weber, a politician should also reflect some moral seriousness and commitment for a particular value. In addition, he should have the capacity to reconcile ethic of conviction (*Gesinnungsethik*) with an ethic of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*). While the ethic of conviction refers to the passionate devotion to some ultimate values such as equality, freedom, justice etc., the ethic of responsibility demands the politician to recognise the possibility of ethical irrationality and violence in pursuit of power and politics. By introducing these two ethics, Weber is marking a distinction between the ethical and the political position. For him, the triumph of a politician lies in cultivating a sense of proportion through which he is able to ensure a practical reconciliation between politics and ethics.

In the novel, Da Sahab too encounters this ethical dilemma. If he chooses the 'truth' and 'justice' as his goal, he would mislay his power. If he pursues power, he has to suppress his conscience. He understands the political necessity of recognising and valuing his desire to expand his power. Like any mature politician, Da Sahab resolves to act without any moral scruples by indulging in the pursuit of power rather than truth. The massacre of Harijans and the murder of Bisu, which lies before him as a 'political problem', demands political action, as any ethical stance would immediately jeopardise the interests of his government and his personal authority. To commit to any ethical stance in this case, he knows that there will be both a personal and political cost of his choice. He has to calculate the gains and losses with respect to his popularity and financial support entailed by his political stance. Therefore the limits of his political environment do not allow him to transform his personal convictions into public conduct. Da Sahab, is not necessarily an "evil men advancing themselves through deceit, but rather a case of good men betraying one basic value - truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth..." (Mcdonald 135). His character could be best

understood through Mcdonald's formulation that "the successful politician need not be a Machiavellian; but truth cannot be his cardinal value" (135). It is the pursuit of power, not of truth, which interests him as a professional politician.

Da Sahab is not a monarch but a people's representative. Therefore, his sovereignty is not absolute, his tenure in future depends on the good will of the people. As a trustee of public authority, he has to act within Law and work for the good of all—rich and the poor alike. To orchestrate that he is 'acting' fairly as a sovereign political leader of the state, Da Sahab constitutes juridical bureaucratic enquiry to find out the truth of Bisu's murder. However, entry into law in democracy echoes the parable of Kafka, "Before the Law" wherein justice for the victims remains an elusive ideal due to incomprehensible bureaucratic language of law. Though he displays a genuine tendency to fulfil his statutory obligations as the supreme public servant of the state, he indisputably lacks sincerity. His indulgence in oft used ritualistic political language and emotive public gestures of sympathy are examples of ingenious political fakery intending to win away the hearts of the people he wishes to reign. What is important here is that Da Sahab uses insincerity as a useful form of communication. Since compromise between power and ethics is necessary in politics, it can be concealed only through sincere rhetorical enactment of insincerity. This is not to suggest that Da Sahab is a pure demagogue indulged in ruthless pursuit of power. He is, to quote the words of John F. Kennedy, 'an idealist without illusions.' He is a pragmatic politician, who knows that "pure power is politically senseless, however, so also is pure sentiment—"sterile excitation"" (Eckstein n. p.). Though he appears to have murdered his conscience, he continues to compensate it with his the feeling of guilt. Simulating the ideal the responsible politician, Da Sahab displays a philosophic reluctance towards the power he dispassionately enjoys.

The Good Bureaucrat

The idea of a good bureaucrat is an incongruity, and to look at bureaucracy with contempt is the new normal. However, the ideal of a law-governed, impersonal, neutral and professional bureaucracy organised on the principles of hierarchical structure, meritocracy and trained specialist has been at the heart of modern democracies. A good bureaucrat must possess political neutrality, unlike the professional politician, and should carry out impartial administration. Through his efficient and effective public

administration, he is needed to ensure that laws are executed in order to maximize the welfare of the individuals. Max Weber, the pre-eminent philosopher of bureaucracy, has observed that problems of modern industrial capitalist societies could best be resolved by an efficient and bureaucratic administration managed by well-trained trained technocrats. Weber argues:

> The honor of the civil servant is vested in his ability to execute conscientiously the order of the superior authorities, exactly as if the order agreed with his own conviction. This holds even if the order appears wrong to him and if, despite the civil servant's remonstrances, the authority insists on the order. Without this moral discipline and self-denial, in the highest sense, the whole apparatus would fall to pieces. (Weber 330-31)

Objectivity, the capability to work without personal/cultural biases is central to the bureaucrat. He is supposed to suppress his personal humanity within. Since the bureaucracy is "a formalized, professionalized, hierarchically organized, and meritocratic form of organization of public administration" (Sager and Rosser1142), therefore the ideal bureaucrat must be impersonal. The destiny of the bureaucrat would be that of an individual who could take a committed stance but does not. Here Weber is proposing the bureaucrat must possess 'moral discipline' and self-denial.

In *Mahabhoj*, Bhandari captures the historical moment of the emergent postcolonial bureaucracy. She outlines the consequence of becoming human in a bureaucratic set-up. Bisu's tragedy, in the novel is an outcome of political-administrative collusion of power. The nexus between the crooked politician and the corrupt bureaucrat generates such a toxic environment, that the possibility of the public welfare through bureaucratic rationality seems impossible. Bisu was jailed and later 'killed' as he was fighting for the rights of Harijans. Binda, Bisu's friend is jailed too because he wants to ensure justice for Bisu. The individual crusaders of justice succumb to the knots of bureaucracy controlled by politics.

Only bureaucrat who struggles to get out of this obnoxious rationality is Mr. Saxena, bureaucrat resisting bureaucracy. Paradoxically, as an exemplary exponent of bureaucracy, he nurtures within an abstract goal of realizing a just world in which bureaucracy would neither be possible nor desirable. He recognises, in the process of his inquiry, that Bisu has been wronged by the legal-bureaucratic systems of democracy. Though he is frustrated with his inner encounter with bureaucracy with its endless capacities for the

supposedly legitimate violence, he tries to respond. He is appalled by the crude injustice of the report prepared by DIG himself, which does not consider any factual element of his honest investigation and concludes by saying that Binda murdered Bisu owing to sexual jealousy:

> Before Bisu came out of jail Binda always behaved like any simple, ordinary man, but after he got to know Bisu he became sharp and aggressive. It was bound to happen when he encountered his wife's lover. No one can put up with such a thing—certainly not a man like Binda.
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> The day Bisu died, he had his last meal at Binda's home. Heera's statement makes it clear that he didn't eat at night. The poison mentioned in the doctor's report takes effect only after ten to twelve hours. The poison was in the food Bisu ate. Binda fed him and when he went off to the city and returned next day. Binda himself acknowledges that he fought with Bisu before he left. Certainly there was poision in that food, which Bisu had. After the lunch, Binda had left for the city, and he returned the day after. Binda himself had confessed to fighting with Bisu before leaving
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> . . . It is Binda who murdered Bisu. (*The Great Feast* 130-31)

For Saxena, DIG's report mirrors a Kafkaesque Bureaucracy. He can clearly see that the law in praxis is nothing but an effect of the bureaucratic rationally subject to political manipulation and devoid of ethical and moral concerns, which is working dangerously against the poor and the weak. He knows that Bisu has not committed suicide: he has been murdered by Zorawar's men. But he cannot spell out this fact due to political pressures. Saxena deeply believed the genuineness of Binda's statement who has told him in a moment of ontological sincerity that "Bisu is not dead, Saheb. He has died for everybody else, but I feel him in me. He can't die, saheb. You wait and see; untill the real criminal in the fire incident is . . ." (*The Great Feast* 131). However, when Saxena tries to tell this truth to his senior, he is told: "And you were joining hands with this Binda to collect evidence regarding the fire? He was talking of the fire to distract attention from the question of Bisu's murder and you, a senior SP, were taken in by him! Simply . . .!" (*The Great Feast* 131).

Saxena, being an instrumental functionary of the system, can very well fathom the depths of bureaucratic terror, legal harassment, and other inescapable acts of physical torture. Fully aware of the consequences, he musters courage to stand with Truth. And he is suspended. Saxena could neither ensure justice to Bisu nor safeguard Binda from the future legal harassment and bureaucratic injustice. He understands that he cannot remain human as long as he remains

trapped in the purely technical and mechanical bureaucracy. Though he cannot rebel in the existential sense, he tries to ensure some hope for the possible restitution of the law, specifically, by rescuing Rukuma from the law and the corrupt bureaucracy.

What, If Not Mourning?

Only Binda and his wife Rukuma, the two minor characters, exhibit some hope and humanity. They exemplify a significant testimony of friendship through their display of personal courage and sacrifice. Although not much is written about them but their personal 'mourning' shows some glimmer of hope in a society fraught with fractions of caste and creed. Binda knows that the government enquiry is nothing but a smokescreen to temporarily handle the situation in favour of the political system. During the enquiry, he tells Saxena:

> Why do you say "investigation" . . .Say you are making fools of everyone.' The fire in Binda's face and voice seemed to be quenched. In pleading tones he said 'Why do you make fun of the villagers like this? Today, Bisu's death is like a pawn which is useful in the chess game that everyone, from Da Saheb to you, is playing, that is why you are so busy investigatin and questioning people so affectioately! But nothing will come of it.' Then suddenly he shouted aloud, 'What has happened to all of you? Has no one a conscience, no one any sense of honour or honesty? Shame on all of you!' (*The Great Feast* 96-97)

Binda's words are unpleasant, but confront Saxena and the readers alike with some difficult truth. In the novel, Binda has taken upon himself to tell the truth because it requires personal courage. Binda's friendship with Bisu empowers him with love and courage. It liberates himself from his fear of ordinariness, and he marches, obedient to his duty, to his friend's death. Like the death of Harijans, he does not want Bisu's death to be turned into a meaningless event. However, the political system, which is inimical to morality and no more fair in its response to poor people is revealed when Da Sahab himself calls D.I.G. and tells him

> He [Da Saheb] continued: 'Sometimes an intelligent criminal takes the most aggressive posture .' He paused and then said: Binda's being absent on the day of the incident and then taking up such an extra aggressive attitude! There is not much room for doubt.'
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> . . .'I am surprised that neither Saxena nor you thought of this angle. Anyway, examine the whole thing once more, with an open mind and

> sharp eyes. I have to catch Bisu's murderer –I have promised the villagers that I will, and now I leave this job to you . . .' (*The Great Feast* 120)

This indication implicates the innocent Binda, and at the end of the novel, we find him in the police lock up shouting: "I've not murdered Bisu. . .I cannot kill him" (*The Great Feast* 167). Binda upholds the value of friendship, but at the cost of his own incarceration.

Epilogue

Is the story of Bisu 'mere fiction' or based on facts? I believe that a piece of literature is always an imagined testimony to an unpleasant event borrowed from real life, and it is always written in pursuit of justice. Of course, justice is deferred in the novel but what the narrative does is to expose how injustice continues as historical residue. It also explicates how the promises of equality and justice, in a democratic country is a sham. As readers we observe that justice is also subjected to coercive manipulation: institutions of normative and political power suspend it temporarily. However, this tragic tale is not without hope. Hope, in the novel, lies in the courage that Binda displays during his custodial torture.

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